



## King's Research Portal

DOI:

[10.5699/modelangrevi.111.1.0141](https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.111.1.0141)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bell, M. (2016). "This was a man!" Goethe's *Egmont* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. *Modern Language Review*, 111(1), 141-61. <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.111.1.0141>

### Citing this paper

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

‘This was a man!’ Goethe’s *Egmont* and Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*

CASSIUS            [...] How many ages hence  
                          Shall this our lofty scene be acted over  
                          In states unborn and accents yet unknown!<sup>1</sup>

It has long been known that Goethe’s *Egmont* draws on Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. A connection between the plays was first mooted by Schiller, with characteristic acuity, in his 1788 review of *Egmont*.<sup>2</sup> A century later Daniel Jacoby identified some of the passages in *Egmont* that were modelled on *Julius Caesar*.<sup>3</sup> The most striking of these occur in the street scenes of *Egmont*, highly praised by Schiller. In the opening scene of Act II the radical clerk Vansen whips the crowd into a frenzy against their Spanish overlords. He claims to have seen an unspecified, perhaps even non-existent book that supposedly details the ancient rights and privileges of the citizens of Brabant. Voices in the crowd angrily demand to see the book:

JETTER    Schafft uns das Buch.

---

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, III. 1. 111–13. Unless noted otherwise, all references to *Julius Caesar* are from: William Shakespeare, *Complete Works* (The Arden Edition), ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 333–60.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens* (Münchner Ausgabe), ed. by Karl Richter and others, 33 vols (Munich: Hanser, 1985–1999), III/1, pp. 843–48 (p. 846). Subsequent references to this edition appear in the form: MA III/1, p. 846.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Jacoby, 'Zu Goethes Egmont. 1: Egmont und Shakespeares Julius Cäsar', *Goethe-Jahrbuch* 12 (1891), 247–52.

EIN BÜRGER Ja, wir müssen's haben.

ANDRE Das Buch! Das Buch!

EIN ANDRER Wir wollen zu der Regentin gehen mit dem Buche.

(*Egmont*, II, 'Platz in Brüssel', MA III/1, p. 269)

Goethe's model was a moment in Antony's funeral speech for Caesar. A seemingly casual mention of Caesar's will enflames the crowd to cry 'The will, the will! we will hear Caesar's will' (III. 2. 140). In *Egmont* the corresponding episode descends into violence. In the nick of time, just as the citizens begin to throw stones and set dogs on one another, Egmont arrives with his retinue. He calls for quiet and chides the crowd for being so rowdy in the vicinity of the Regent's palace. It is an ill omen, he says, that they celebrate on a workday. He questions three of the citizens about their occupation — a carpenter, a grocer, and a tailor, the last of whom Egmont recognises as having made uniforms for his troops. The crowd is pacified, and Egmont warns them that their rowdy antics will make it even less likely that they will retain the privileges they are clamouring for. The episode reworks the opening scene of *Julius Caesar*, in which two pompous tribunes, Flavius and Murellus, question a crowd of tradesmen, and a cobbler runs rings around Murellus:<sup>4</sup>

FLAVIUS Hence! home, you idle creatures get you home:

Is this a holiday? what! know you not,

Being mechanical, you ought not walk

Upon a labouring day without the sign

Of your profession? Speak, what trade art thou?

FIRST COMMONER Why, sir, a carpenter.

MURELLUS Where is thy leather apron and thy rule?

---

<sup>4</sup> He is better known as Marullus. The form Murellus is from the 1623 first folio on which the Arden edition is based.

What dost thou with thy best apparel on?

You, sir, what trade are you?

SECOND COMMONER Truly, sir, in respect of a fine workman, I am but, as you would say, a cobbler.

MURELLUS But what trade art thou? answer me directly.

SECOND COMMONER A trade, sir, that, I hope, I may use with a safe conscience; which is, indeed, sir, a mender of bad soles.

MURELLUS What trade, thou knave? thou naughty knave, what trade?

SECOND COMMONER Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me: yet, if you be out, sir, I can mend you.

MURELLUS What meanest thou by that? mend me, thou saucy fellow!

SECOND COMMONER Why, sir, cobble you.

(*Julius Caesar*, I. 1. 1–20)

The scene comically emphasizes the distance between the people and the tribunes who, assuming they are tribunes *of* the people, seem alarmingly remote and haughty. The corresponding scene in *Egmont* points in the opposite direction. Though Egmont's attitude to the people is paternalistic,<sup>5</sup> he understands them and commands their respect. The fact that he remembers the tailor having made some uniforms for his men shows an impressive interest in people's lives.

Subsequent critics have noted Jacoby's findings, but not built on them, despite their evident interest and the fact that Jacoby had constructed a seemingly plausible genesis for the passages. In the spring of 1774 (or earlier) Goethe began to write his own play titled 'Der

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Ein ordentlicher Bürger, der sich ehrlich und fleißig nährt, hat überall soviel Freiheit, als er braucht' (*Egmont*, II, 'Platz in Brüssel'; MA, III/1, p. 270).

Tod Julius Cäsars', only a few short fragments of which are extant (MA, I/1, p. 386).<sup>6</sup> At some point, for reasons that are unclear, Goethe abandoned his 'Cäsar'.<sup>7</sup> Jacoby hypothesized that Goethe kept some of his Caesar material and spliced it into his next play — hence the Shakespearean material in *Egmont*. While Jacoby's argument makes good sense in chronological terms, in other respects it is less plausible. 'Julius Cäsar' and *Egmont* are very different in format and sentiment; the Caesar play resembled *Götz* far more than it did *Egmont*. It was conceived as a biographical drama spanning the hero's life; the extant fragments include events from the time of Sulla (d. 78 BC), and if the play did indeed extend to Caesar's death in 44 BC, it would have covered over thirty years of historical time. The play would thus have contravened the unity of time much as *Götz* did and as Goethe advocated in his 'Rede zum Shakespeares Tag'.<sup>8</sup> *Egmont* is much less expansive: although it dramatizes events that spread over several years, this is by no means evident to an audience,

---

<sup>6</sup> On the genesis, see Hans Gerhard Gräf, *Goethe über seine Dichtungen. Versuch einer Sammlung aller Äußerungen des Dichters über seine poetischen Werke*, 9 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Rütten & Loening, 1901–14), II/1, pp. 71–74. Vague references to an unfinished play in 1773 may or may not refer to the Caesar project.

<sup>7</sup> See the speculation recorded in Stephen Fennell, 'Johann Wolfgang von Goethe', in *Great Shakespeareans*, vol. III, ed. by Roger Paulin (London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 44–91 (p. 501).

<sup>8</sup> MA I/2, p. 412.

who could easily infer that the action spanned just a few weeks or even days.<sup>9</sup> The politics of *Egmont* are also quite different from the little we know of the Caesar play. According to Bodmer, Goethe ‘hat Brutus und Cassius für niedertrachtig erklärt, weil sie den Cäsar *ex insidiis*, von hinten, um das Leben gebracht haben’.<sup>10</sup> Goethe disapproved of the conspirators and seems not to have been interested in their attempts to restore the ancient rights of the Roman Republic that Caesar threatened. The politics of *Egmont* are if anything the reverse of Goethe’s view of Caesar. *Egmont* is very much concerned with the ancient rights and privileges of the Low Countries and treats the appeals for their restoration sympathetically for the most part. And if anyone in *Egmont* is ‘niederträchtig’, it is Alba, the representative of autocracy, who has Egmont arrested and executed ‘*ex insidiis*’. The politics of Goethe’s *Egmont* look more like a pro-Republican version of the Julius Caesar story, and not the pro-Caesar version that ‘Julius Cäsar’ would presumably have been.

There is another, more serious objection to Jacoby’s theory. It is hard to imagine how Goethe could have included Murellus and Flavius in his ‘Cäsar’ without being seen to commit blatant plagiarism. Giving the roles and words of Flavius and Murellus to other characters in the Caesar story would have been little better. On the other hand, in *Egmont* the material is remote enough in time and place from the Roman context as not to seem plagiarized and to escape the attention of critics for one hundred years. For these reasons, it seems more likely

---

<sup>9</sup> Sammons points out that the only significant break in the continuity of time is between Act III and IV, when Alba is consolidating his power in the Low Countries. However, the arrival of Alba has already been signalled in Act II, and the situation on the streets is already fraught, so that the audience would hardly notice a gap between Act III and IV. See Jeffrey L. Sammons, ‘On the Structure of Goethe’s *Egmont*’, *JEGP*, 62 (1963), 241–51 (p. 243).

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Gräf, *Goethe über seine Dichtungen*, II/1, p. 74.

that the Shakespearean quotations in *Egmont* were not part of Goethe's 'Cäsar' at all. They are more likely to have been the result of Goethe's re-reading of *Julius Caesar* while he worked on *Egmont*.

There are other Shakespearean elements in *Egmont* — not noticed by Jacoby or subsequent critics — that lend weight to the view that Goethe engaged with Shakespeare afresh while writing *Egmont*. One seemingly trivial example is the last item in the *dramatis personae* of *Egmont*: 'Volk, Gefolge, Wachen u.s.w.' (MA, III/1, p. 246). The corresponding item in the *dramatis personae* of some eighteenth-century editions of *Julius Caesar* is 'Citizens, Guards, and Attendants'.<sup>11</sup> Whilst the similarity might be coincidental, the balance of evidence makes it likely that while writing out the *dramatis personae* of *Egmont* Goethe either had one of these editions of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* to hand or fresh in his memory and simply copied the Shakespearian item across into *Egmont*.

In what follows I shall argue that *Egmont* can be read as a response — at times explicit, at others implicit — to *Julius Caesar*. Goethe's comment to Eckermann in 1825 — 'Ich tat wohl, daß ich durch meinen *Götz von Berlichingen* und *Egmont* ihn mir vom Halse schaffte'<sup>12</sup> — is true in a stronger sense than has hitherto been appreciated. The evidence

---

<sup>11</sup> For instance, the editions of Walker, Hanmer and Warburton have the item in this form: *Dramatick Works of William Shakespeare*, 7 vols (London: Walker, 1734); *The Works of Shakespear*, ed. by Thomas Hanmer, 6 vols (Oxford: OUP, 1743–44); *The Works of Shakespear*, ed. by Thomas Hanmer, 6 vols (London: Knapton et al., 1745), *The Works of Shakespear*, ed. by Alexander Pope and William Warburton, 8 vols (London: Knapton et al., 1747).

<sup>12</sup> 25 December 1825; MA XIX, 152.

indicates that at an early stage of composition, possibly while planning the play's structure, Goethe referred to used *Julius Caesar* directly as a model. In particular, the peculiar treatment of politics in *Egmont* was a response to Shakespeare's play of a kind that is typical of Goethe — a mixture of enthusiastic admiration and competitive rivalry, both an absorbing and a purging of Shakespeare's influence.

In addition to the small-scale parallels identified by Jacoby, it is my contention that Goethe adapted some of the structural features of Shakespeare's play. By omitting Graf Hoorn, who was executed alongside Egmont, Goethe has created a configuration of characters that resembles *Julius Caesar*, with Egmont caught between the scheming Oranien on the one side and the manipulative Alba on the other, just as Brutus is caught between Cassius and Antony. *Julius Caesar* traces a failed attempt to restore the ancient rights and privileges of the Roman Republic, an attempt that descends into chaotic civil war from which the strong imperial regime of Augustus will emerge. At the same time Shakespeare acknowledges the legacy of Brutus, the last great Republican. Although the play is titled *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, it might with more justice be called 'The Tragedy of Marcus Brutus', and that is indeed how Goethe read the play.<sup>13</sup> Brutus speaks more lines and has more stage time than the play's other characters.<sup>14</sup> The epitome of flawed nobility, he conforms to a standard Aristotelean model of the tragic hero. As Antony puts it:

---

<sup>13</sup> So James Boyd, *Goethe's Knowledge of English Literature* (Oxford: OUP, 1932), p. 37.

However, Boyd argues that the connection between *Egmont* and *Julius Caesar* lies in the similarity of the title characters (p. 38), as does Friedrich Gundolf, *Goethe* (Berlin: Bondi, 1916), pp. 188–89.

<sup>14</sup> See William Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, RSC Edition, ed. by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (London: Macmillan, 2007), p. 1804.



This was the noblest Roman of them all:  
 All the conspirators save only he  
 Did that they did in envy of great Caesar;  
 He only, in a general honest thought  
 And common good to all, made one of them.  
 His life was gentle, and the elements  
 So mix'd in him that Nature might stand up  
 And say to all the world 'This was a man!' (*Julius Caesar*, v. 5. 68–75)

Brutus naturally inclines to the common good, but also to high-minded naivety. The price of co-opting Brutus into the conspiracy is that Cassius has to defer to Brutus. Had Brutus merely been the conspiracy's figure-head, things might have gone better, but Brutus' principles make a merely representative role impossible. He must be the conspiracy's leader in fact as well as in appearance. When the conspirators meet to discuss the assassination of Caesar, Cassius argues that Antony should also be killed, for he is 'a shrewd contriver' whose 'means, | If he improve them, may well stretch so far | As to annoy us all' (*Julius Caesar*, II. 1. 157–59). Brutus counters that Antony is no more than an appendage of Caesar; killing him would be unnecessarily 'bloody'; the conspirators will win more friends if they are 'sacrificers, but not butchers'. The conspirators defer to Brutus' desire to avoid further bloodshed, but events show that Brutus was wrong. After the assassination Brutus compounds his error by making a speech at Caesar's funeral that is worthy but so prosaic — it is actually in prose — as to suggest he has little grasp of politics. That he allows Antony to speak after him, much more powerfully, confirms the impression of his naivety.

In Brutus and Cassius, then, Shakespeare contrasts the humane, principled but naive Brutus with the politically shrewd Cassius, who is however fatefully dependent on Brutus. Shrewd

politics and naive politics are bound together in a single tragic fate. The same is true of Goethe's play. Egmont and Oranien represent a new antithesis of the naive and shrewd politicians, set against a new political and historical background. In Goethe's play the appeal to traditional rights and privileges is voiced not by Roman senators but by aristocrats and plebeians alike. The citizens of Brussels may be prone to violent disorder, but Goethe presents them as distinct individuals with relatively well defined social and personal qualities, whereas Shakespeare's Roman crowds are homogeneous and driven entirely by external impulses.<sup>15</sup> Most of the people of Brussels are fiercely loyal to Egmont, and though they are cowed into silence by Alba's repression, the play's finale indicates that Egmont's execution will inspire them to rebel against the Spaniards. In *Egmont* the popular will is a more coherent and positive force than in *Julius Caesar*, at the same time as it is more individuated. The streets of Brussels represent a more modern world than the streets of Rome.

The controversial ending of *Egmont* pivots on the question of legacy raised in *Julius Caesar* by Antony. Oranien judges the immediate danger correctly; like Cassius he is politically astute. Egmont judges the immediate danger incorrectly, out of excessive trust in the king and a desire to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, and yet his martyrdom animates the rebellion that will lead to the independence of the United Provinces. Just as one tragic fate binds Cassius and Brutus, the rebellion against Spain depends on both Egmont's naive martyrdom and Oranien's shrewd political guidance. The former sets the rebellion in motion, and the latter will bring it to a successful conclusion. Egmont's legacy is therefore more active than Brutus'. The crowning of Egmont at the end of Goethe's play, which prefigures the Dutch victory, can thus be read as a challenge to Antony's celebration of Brutus as 'the noblest

---

<sup>15</sup> Fennell, 'Goethe', p. 60.

Roman of them all'. Egmont is equally noble, but his legacy is more real; his spirit will live on in the popular will of the United Provinces.

Goethe makes this connection by means of an intertextual link to *Julius Caesar*, indeed the play's one explicit reference to the Caesar story and its one advertisement to the reader that such intertextual links exist. In the monologue that closes Act I, Brackenburg laments his lack of strong feelings about the fate of his country. It had not always been so: in rhetorical exercises at school he had been able to deliver a passionate version of Brutus' speech against tyranny: 'War ich doch ein andrer Junge als Schulknabe! — Wenn da ein Exercitium aufgegeben war: Brutus Rede für die Freiheit, zur Übung der Redekunst, da war doch immer Fritz der erste [...] — damals kocht es und trieb!' (*Egmont*, I, 'Bürgerhaus'; MA, III/1, p. 264). The reference to Brutus is more subtle than meets the eye, for it also contains an oblique allusion to the figure of Casca in *Julius Caesar*. Brutus and Cassius meet Casca coming from the Capitol. Brutus responds to Casca's jokiness by decrying him as dull: 'What a blunt fellow is this grown to be! | He was quick mettle when he went to school' (*Julius Caesar*, I. 2. 294–95). Like Casca, Brackenburg has lost his fire; he can no longer summon any passion concerning politics. The passage immediately preceding Brackenburg's monologue, where Clärchen expresses passionate enthusiasm for Egmont, shows Brackenburg just how far he has fallen. This leads to the real point of the allusion, which concerns Brutus more than Brackenburg. Brutus' legacy is not what it was. First it was debased to a mere schoolboy rhetorical exercise, and now even the exercise no longer excites. Egmont inspires passionate allegiance in Clärchen; for Brackenburg Brutus' legacy is an empty memory, no longer able to energize political action.

Egmont and Oranien differ from their Roman forebears in one further crucial respect. Cassius and Brutus are victims of their mutual misunderstanding. Whilst Egmont is guilty of short-term misjudgements, he and Oranien understand one another perfectly well. Egmont's tragic fate is not a result of conflict with Oranien; it is a result of conflict with the style of politics represented by Oranien (and by Alba and the Regentin), a modern style of politics concerned narrowly with success and not with a broader sense of a good life.<sup>16</sup> It may be significant in this connection that one of Goethe's historical sources, Famianus Strada, claims that Orange drew some of his political ideas from the writings of Machiavelli (the Florentine politician and writer and not the character Machiavell in Goethe's play).<sup>17</sup> Egmont's legacy, strong though it is, cannot be understood as a purely political legacy, or at least not political in the narrow modern sense. The freedom for which Egmont claims to die is conveyed through an image of martyrdom, not through political action. *Egmont* is a historical tragedy; Egmont himself is a victim of the modern age and his fate represents what happens to traditional values in the modern world.<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

Since Schiller's 1788 review of *Egmont*, much attention has focused on the play's ending. Schiller objected to the shift from a moving and illusionistic dramatic mode ('die wahrste und rührendste Situation') to an anti-illusionistic, operatic one ('ein Salto Mortale in eine

---

<sup>16</sup> Compare Gundolf, who sees the play more broadly as a conflict between humanity and the state (*Goethe*, p. 192).

<sup>17</sup> Heinrich Clairmont, 'Die Figur des Machiavelli in Goethes *Egmont*', *Poetica* 15 (1963), 289–313 (p. 295).

<sup>18</sup> So too Hartmut Reinhardt in MA III/1, p. 826.

Opernwelt').<sup>19</sup> The problem was compounded, Schiller felt, by Goethe's failure to ground Egmont's martyrdom in the play's action. Although an audience might feel fear and pity for Egmont, the play showed no heroism that an audience might admire or that would justify his status as a martyr.<sup>20</sup> Schiller's criticisms point towards a further problem. The action of the play is a prelude to the independence of the United Provinces and forms part of a longer historical narrative; the execution of Egmont is a catalyst for the Low Countries' rebellion against Spain. This unavoidable historical fact meant that the play had to be constructed from the end backwards, so to speak: the character of Egmont and the action leading up to his execution had to be constructed in such a way as to explain the rebellion. Goethe acknowledges this by choosing to end the play in the hours immediately before the execution. The play takes us virtually to the point at which rebellion begins, and Egmont's vision of Clärchen as Freedom looks forward to the ultimate success of the rebellion. The ending thus makes demands of the action and characterization of the whole play. If the action and characterization fail to explain the rebellion, the play might well be counted a failure.<sup>21</sup>

The progressively more chaotic street scenes, praised by Schiller and subsequent critics, do at least convey the atmosphere of an incipient rebellion. By means of a parallel — the play is rich in them<sup>22</sup> — the street scenes connect the rebellion to Egmont's fate. In the second scene of Act V we see a depressed and anxious Egmont in gaol. The previous scene portrays the

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted in MA III/1, 848.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in MA III/1, 844.

<sup>21</sup> The argument is put in particularly sharp form in Sammons, 'Structure', p. 249: 'nowhere have we had any indication that the meaning of Egmont's personality is somehow connected with the freedom of the Netherlands'.

<sup>22</sup> On the complex structure of the play see esp. Sammons, 'Structure', pp. 243–45.

effects of Alba's repression on the people of Brussels, once lively and combustible, now cowed and furtive. These parallel scenes of fear and repression contrast with the final scene. Now Egmont is rejuvenated, and he imagines the population of the Low Countries united and resolved to defend themselves against Spain. A revolution in Egmont's condition is accompanied by an imagined revolution in the people's.

The question remains: what makes Egmont a suitable symbol for the popular uprising? One is autochthony. Egmont represents the Low Countries because he is the only member of the play's ruling class who has no connection with foreign territories.<sup>23</sup> Also he is the only member of the ruling class who appears in a street scene, where his presence is rewarded by expressions of respect and affection. By his nature and behaviour he is suited to representing the idea of a government appropriate to the character of the people. However; his local roots and connection with the people are more a matter of identity and sentiment than politics. In the spirit of Schiller's review, E. M. Wilkinson argues that 'what we witness is not so much a tragedy of action as a tragedy of being'.<sup>24</sup>

The lack of political agency has led critics to conclude that Egmont is disappointing as a practical politician.<sup>25</sup> He makes a series of incorrect judgements. He wrongly assumes the Regentin will remain in post, as she has made empty threats to resign in the past. When

---

<sup>23</sup> Margarete von Parma is Italian; Alba is Spanish; the historical Oranien was born in the German Principality of Nassau, and his name connects him with the Principality of Orange in southern France.

<sup>24</sup> E. M. Wilkinson, 'The Relation of Form and Meaning in Goethe's *Egmont*', *PEGS*, 18 (1948), 149–82 (p. 180).

<sup>25</sup> See the summary in Ellis, 'Vexed Question', pp. 116–21.

Oranien insists that Egmont consider what will happen if she does resign, Egmont wrongly predicts that her replacement will behave broadly as she has done. He wrongly assumes that the king will not alter his policy, despite the failure of repressive measures. When Oranien suggest that the king might turn his aggression from the people to the nobility, Egmont demurs, again wrongly, on the grounds that the empire's constitution prevents the king from doing so. Egmont's beliefs rest on a misplaced confidence in the traditional many-layered structures of Imperial government. This is why he can blithely and wrongly assure the citizens of Brussels that 'ein ordentlicher Bürger, der sich ehrlich und fleißig nährt, hat überall soviel Freiheit als er braucht' (*Egmont*, II, 'Platz in Brüssel'; MA, III/1, p. 270). Egmont wrongly assumes that things will carry on as before, and that the widespread civil unrest and increasingly harsh Spanish repression can be contained within the Empire's traditional structures. As Reiss observes:

Genau wie der historische Egmont gehört der Egmont des Dramas zur Welt des Heiligen Römischen Reichs, dessen etablierten Gebräuche, Traditionen und Gesetze er achtet. Er ist kein Rebell, ja nicht einmal ein Reformator. Im Gegenteil, sein Blick ist rückwärts in die Vergangenheit gewendet.<sup>26</sup>

Reiss reconstructs a political philosophy from Egmont's attitudes. It has parallels with Justus Möser's defence of the 'ursprüngliche Kontrakte, [...] Privilegien und Freiheiten, [...] Bedingungen und Verjähungen' that underpinned the self-government of relatively independent German cities such as Goethe's Frankfurt and Möser's Osnabrück.<sup>27</sup> Seen in this context, Egmont and the people of Brussels defend the traditional and 'natural' order of things, whilst Alba represents an attempt to subvert local traditions and replace them with a

---

<sup>26</sup> Hans Reiss, *Formgestaltung und Politik: Goethe-Studien* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1993), p. 163.

<sup>27</sup> Reiss, *Formgestaltung und Politik*, p. 146.

modern, absolutist approach to government — the kind of philosophical theory of government Möser decried in his 1775 essay ‘Der jetzige Hang zu allgemeinen Gesetzen und Verordnungen ist der gemeinen Freiheit gefährlich’.<sup>28</sup> This is the essence of Egmont’s argument against Alba. King Philip and his advisors are making a mistake if they think that they can remake the character of the people of the Low Countries, as they evidently intend to do:

So hat er denn beschlossen was kein Fürst beschließen sollte! Die Kraft seines Volks, ihr Gemüt, den Begriff den sie von sich selbst haben, will er schwächen, niederdrücken, zerstören, um sie bequem regieren zu können. Er will den innern Kern ihrer Eigenheit verderben, gewiß in der Absicht sie glücklicher zu machen. Er will sie vernichten damit sie Etwas werden, ein ander Etwas. O, wenn seine Absicht gut ist; so wird sie mißgeleitet! Nicht dem König widersetzt man sich, man stellt sich nur dem Könige entgegen, der einen falschen Weg zu wandeln, die ersten unglücklichen Schritte macht. (*Egmont*, IV, ‘Der Culenburgische Palast’; MA, III/1, pp. 307–8)

But if we ask where this political theory has come from, there is a simpler answer than Möser. Egmont tells us that ‘der Bürger [wünscht] seine alte Verfassung zu behalten, von seinen Landsleuten regiert zu sein’ (MA, III/1, pp. 306). He knows this not through any Möserian reflection on the history of independent German polities, nor because it is his own conviction; he knows it because the people have told him so: ‘Nicht meine Gesinnungen! Nur was bald hier, bald da, von Großen und von Kleinen, Klugen und Thoren gesprochen, laut verbreitet wird’ (MA, III/1, pp. 305). His concerns about the king’s plans are the people’s concerns, he tells Alba: ‘Leider rechtfertigen deine Worte die Furcht des Volks, die allgemeine Furcht!’ (MA, III/1, pp. 307). And the play shows us how Egmont knows what the people fear. In Act II he arrives on stage just as the crowd shout ‘Freiheit und Privilegien!

---

<sup>28</sup> So Reinhardt (MA III/1, 825).



Privilegien und Freiheit!’ (MA, III/1, pp. 270). What Egmont says to Alba is a report of what he has heard people saying on the streets. Until he is forced to address these issues by Alba, Egmont shows no interest in political theory; the beliefs he expresses are resolutely practical and applied to or derived from the specifics of his situation.<sup>29</sup> When he does venture a general statement, he simply reflects what he has heard the citizens saying.

In Egmont’s defence, it must be said that the action of the play and the historical events of which it is part do justify his beliefs. He correctly doubts the wisdom of increased repressive measures.<sup>30</sup> If Alba acts against the local nobility, he will risk setting the whole of the Low Countries against him:

Uns gefangen zu nehmen, wär ein verloren und fruchtloses Unternehmen. Nein, sie wagen nicht das Panier der Tyrannei so hoch aufzustecken. Der Windhauch, der diese Nachricht übers Land brächte würde ein ungeheures Feuer zusammen treiben. [...] Ein schrecklicher Bund würde in einem Augenblick das Volk vereinigen. Haß und ewige Trennung vom spanischen Namen würde sich gewaltsam erklären. (*Egmont*, II, ‘Egmonts Wohnung’; MA, III/1, pp. 280)

We might detect an allusion here to Portia’s premonition of trouble at the Capitol: ‘I heard a bustling rumour, like a fray, | And the wind brings it from the Capitol’ (*Julius Caesar*, II. 4. 18–19). Shakespeare’s Rome and Goethe’s Low Countries are both highly combustible. A single act of violence can be enough to cause war — the assassination of Caesar, the execution of Egmont. The fear of war weighs heavily in Egmont’s mind, as he makes plain to Oranien:

---

<sup>29</sup> Martin Swales, ‘A Questionable Politician: A Discussion of the Ending to Goethe’s *Egmont*’, *MLR*, 66 (1971), 832–40 (pp. 834–37).

<sup>30</sup> Ellis, ‘Vexed Question’, p. 121.

Denk an die Städte, die Edeln, das Volk, an die Handlung, den Feldbau! die Gewerbe!  
 und denke die Verwüstung, den Mord! — Ruhig sieht der Soldat wohl im Felde seinen  
 Kameraden neben sich hinfallen — Aber den Fluß herunter werden dir die Leichen der  
 Bürger, der Kinder, der Jungfrauen entgegenschwimmen, daß du mit Entsetzen dastehst  
 und nicht mehr weißt wessen Sache du verteidigst, da die zu Grunde gehen für deren  
 Freiheit du die Waffen ergriffst. (*Egmont*, II, 'Egmonts Wohnung'; MA, III/1, p. 281)

The bodies of the innocent dead are the bodies of family, friends, and fellow citizens. Antony makes a similarly grim prediction over the body of Caesar, though he appears to welcome the prospect of carnage that Egmont abhors:

Domestic fury and fierce civil strife  
 Shall cumber all the parts of Italy:  
 Blood and destruction shall be so in use,  
 And dreadful objects so familiar,  
 That mothers shall but smile when they behold  
 Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war:  
 All pity choked with custom of fell deeds,  
 And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,  
 With Ate by his side come hot from hell,  
 Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice  
 Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war [...]

(*Julius Caesar*, III. 1. 263–73)

The nature of the conflict envisaged in the two plays is more similar than it might at first seem. Although *Egmont* predicts that the population will rise up as one against the Spaniards, the war in the Low Countries was not simply a war between occupier and occupied. It was a civil war fought in part along regional and sectarian lines. The play makes the internecine

nature of the conflict clear from the outset. Brackenburg complains in Act I that the country ‘wird [...] von innerm Zwiste heftiger bewegt’ (‘Bürgerhaus’; MA, III/1, p. 264). Egmont sees early signs of civil strife in the streets of Brussels (‘Was fangt ihr an? Bürger gegen Bürger!’, MA, III/1, p. 270), and in a literal realization of Antony’s words, the ‘dogs of war’ have been unleashed: *‘Buben pfeifen, werfen mit Steinen, hetzen Hunde an’*.

Goethe’s play presents two ways of understanding the war. The disturbances referred to by Brackenburg in Act I and manifested on the streets at the beginning of Act II are signs of an impending civil war which will pit the people of the Low Countries against one another. It is not clear whether the dividing lines of the conflict will be regional, ideological, linguistic or religious. The historical Egmont was a devout catholic, and this was one reason for his reluctance to break with the Spaniards. There is scant indication that Goethe’s Egmont is motivated by religion. He refers to Calvinism as ‘die fremde Lehre’, but in the context of maintaining traditional local customs rather than religious doctrine (Act II, ‘Platz in Brüssel’; MA, III/1, p. 271). Egmont responds to the threat of civil strife by re-imposing order in a paternalistic manner and by force of the respect in which he is held. He represents an eighteenth-century ideal of government that seeks to maintain public order out of a benevolent concern for the well-being of the people and dispenses justice tempered by humanity.<sup>31</sup> In his debate with Oranien, Egmont envisages a different kind of strife, a war between the Low Countries and Spain. To his mind it is equally undesirable, for it will lead to the slaughter of the very people he and Oranien are sworn to protect. He does not see it as a

---

<sup>31</sup> Sammons is more sceptical: ‘Egmont is in fact nowhere during the action of the play interested in the freedom of the Netherlands. He is interested in the freedom of Egmont’ (‘Structure’, p. 250).

war of independence or indeed as a just war. His attitude is still that of a benevolent paternalist with a strong aversion to any form of disorder whatsoever.

Alba's threat of repression changes Egmont's attitude.<sup>32</sup> Egmont now recognises that the freedom of the Low Countries is at stake and accepts the necessity of war. No longer the representative of an eighteenth-century paternalism that has civic order as its priority, Egmont becomes a symbol of a war of independence. He enters a new political world in which the ideology of independent self-government is paramount, the world of the American War of Independence. In order to make this transition, however, Egmont must die. Indeed, the new political order is established by means of his martyrdom.

Again comparison with *Julius Caesar* sheds light on *Egmont*. The contrast between the endings of the two plays could not be starker. Brutus dies in a bloody civil war, his alliance with Cassius torn apart in a chaos of mutual misunderstanding. The outgoing republican era is marred by deep disorder of which this latest episode is only the most chaotic and most tragic. It makes plain the need for a new firm, autocratic government, with Rome ruled by a wise and just monarch. Eighteenth-century governments, in particular France under Louis XIV, modelled their idea of benevolent monarchy on the rule of Augustus. In the same way as Augustus rescued Rome from the Civil Wars, Louis XIV imposed order after the religious wars: the choice is between monarchy and anarchy. Goethe's play represents a quite different segment of political history. Instead of acting as a benevolent, paternalistic ruler protecting

---

<sup>32</sup> Irmgard Hobson, 'Oranien and Alba: The Two Political Dialogues in *Egmont*', *GR*, 50 (1975), 260–74 (p. 269).

his people from civil strife, Egmont is martyred and propels his people into a new era of ideology.<sup>33</sup>

\* \* \*

Why then does Egmont seem to show so little awareness of his historical mission, and why does he misjudge the situation until his arrest? This is the key question, and the answer indicates what is interesting and unusual about the politics of Goethe's play. We have seen how Egmont's death creates the impetus for the rebellion which Oranien will steer to its successful conclusion. This is the reverse of *Julius Caesar*, where the schemer Cassius motivates the rebellion against Caesar. The honourable Brutus is lured into the conspiracy by an act of conspiracy: by leaving fake letters in his garden Cassius and his co-conspirators deceive Brutus into thinking that the Romans would have him 'speak and strike' against Caesar. Having duped Brutus once, Cassius now needs to handle him carefully. This is one reason why Cassius defers to Brutus' arguments concerning Antony and, in effect, hands over the leadership of the conspiracy to him. The weakness of the conspiracy is evident, and it contrasts with the strength of the rebellion of the Low Countries against Spain, which is born in naivety and grows into a political uprising after Egmont's martyrdom. Egmont is in no sense deceived by Oranien. On the contrary, Oranien would have Egmont survive and join him in resistance from the Dutch lands. Egmont becomes a martyr through his own naive will. It is crucial that Egmont fails to grasp the consequences of accepting Alba's invitation. There cannot be any sense of his knowingly going to his death.

---

<sup>33</sup> Compare Karl Rosenkranz's view that the play represents 'die Staatsidee in ihrem Werden' (*Goethe und seine Werke*, Königsberg: Bornträger, 1847, p. 225).

Brutus and Egmont are men of principle. They act out of a spirit of benevolence and care for the common good: Soest describes the people's love for Egmont as follows in the first scene of Act I:

Warum ist alle Welt dem Grafen Egmont so hold? warum trügen wir ihn alle auf den Händen? Weil man ihm ansieht daß er uns wohlwill; weil ihm die Fröhlichkeit, das freie Leben die gute Meinung aus den Augen sieht; weil er nichts besitzt, das er dem Dürftigen nicht mitteilte, auch dem ders nicht bedarf. (Act I, 'Armbrustschießen'; MA III/1, p. 249)

It is a similar sense of the 'common good' that Antony praises in Brutus. And as Egmont is modelled on Brutus, so Oranien is modelled on Cassius. Caesar tells Antony he fears Cassius because 'he thinks too much', and 'he looks | Quite through the deeds of men' (*Julius Caesar*, I. 2. 194, 200–201). The Regentin fears Oranien for the same reasons: 'Soll ich aufrichtig reden ich fürchte Oranien [...]. Oranien sinnt nichts Gutes, seine Gedanken reichen in die Ferne, er ist heimlich, scheint alles anzunehmen [...]' (Act I, 'Palast der Regentin'; MA III/1, p. 257). Oranien confirms the picture in Act II in his famous description of himself as a master-strategist and reader of others' intentions and motivations:

Ich trage viele Jahre her alle unsere Verhältnisse am Herzen, ich stehe immer wie über einem Schachspiele und halte keinen Zug des Gegners für unbedeutend; und wie müßige Menschen mit der größten Sorgfalt sich um die Geheimnisse der Natur bekümmern, so halt' ich es für Pflicht, für Beruf eines Fürsten, die Gesinnungen, die Ratschläge aller Parteien zu kennen.' (Act II, 'Egmonts Wohnung'; MA III/1, p. 279)

According to Ellis, Oranien's self-portrait is unflattering. Oranien 'looks at the opponent's every move, but allows his actions to be determined as tactical responses to those moves

without having a plan of his own.’<sup>34</sup> Egmont is his own man; Oranien is always someone else’s.

Ellis’s interpretation of Oranien tallies with the Rousseauesque philosophy that Goethe picked up from Herder in the early 1770s. Oranien’s hollowed-out self is typical of modern civilization. Primitive man was motivated by the desire for survival (*amour de soi*); in modern civilization people have lost their identity because they have developed a sense of self based on the opinions of others (*amour-propre*). Goethe presents an argument of this kind in a review published in the *Frankfurter Gelehrte Anzeigen* in 1772.

Sobald eine Nation poliert ist, sobald hat sie conventionelle Wege zu denken, zu handlen, zu empfinden; sobald hört sie auf Charakter zu haben. [...] Die Verhältnisse der Religion, die mit ihnen auf das engste verbundenen bürgerlichen Beziehungen, der Druck der Gesetze, der noch größere Druck gesellschaftlicher Verbindungen und tausend andere Dinge lassen den polierten Menschen und die polierte Nation, nie ein eigenes Geschöpf sein; betäuben den Wink der Natur, und verwischen jeden Zug, aus dem ein charakteristisches Bild gemacht werden könnte.<sup>35</sup>

Modern *amour-propre* leads to a hollowing out of character and identity. One can no longer be ‘ein eignes Geschöpf’. Egmont makes this clear in his reaction to Alba’s news of the king’s change of policy. The king is making a mistake by attempting to destroy the character of the Low Countries: ‘Er will den innern Kern ihrer Eigenheit verderben’, *Egmont*, IV, ‘Der

---

<sup>34</sup> John M. Ellis, ‘The Vexed Question of Egmont’s Political Judgement’, in *Tradition and Creation: Essays in Honour of Elizabeth Mary Wilkinson*, ed. by C. P. Magill, Brian A. Rowley and Christopher A. Smith (Leeds: Maney, 1978), pp. 116–30 (p. 124).

<sup>35</sup> Review of *Charakteristik der vornehmsten Europäischen Nationen. Aus dem Englischen*, in the *Frankfurter Gelehrte Anzeigen*, 1772 (MA 1/2, 380–81).

Culenburgische Palast' (MA, III/1, pp. 308. What does a people without a self look like?

Jetter describes Alba's Spanish soldiers in precisely these terms:

Es schnürt einem das Herz ein, wenn man so einen Haufen die Gassen  
hinabmarschieren sieht. Kerzengrad, mit unverwandtem Blick, Ein Tritt so viel ihrer  
sind, und wenn sie auf der Schildwache stehn und du gehst an einem vorbei, ist s als  
wenn er dich durch und durch sehen wollte, und sieht so steif und mürrisch aus, daß du  
auf allen Ecken einen Zuchtmeister zu sehen glaubst. Sie tun mir gar nicht wohl. Unsre  
Miliz war doch noch ein lustig Volk, sie nahmen sich was heraus, stunden mit  
ausgekrätschten Beinen da, hatten den Hut überm Ohr, lebten und ließen leben; diese  
Kerle aber sind wie Maschinen, in denen ein Teufel sitzt. (Act IV, 'Straße'; MA III/1, p.  
292)

Jetter's comments recall Herder's critique of the modern nation state in his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774). The new absolutist nation state, Herder argues, is the result of technological, bureaucratic, and in particular military advances. Armies have become technologically and organizationally mechanized. They are drilled to perform like machines and have become expressions of a single controlling will:

Neue Methoden entübrigten Kräfte, die voraus nöthig waren, sich aber jetzt [...] mit der  
Zeit verlohren. Gewisse Tugenden der Wissenschaft, des Krieges, des bürgerlichen  
Lebens, der Schifffahrt, der Regierung —man brauchte sie nicht mehr: es ward  
Maschine, und die Maschiene regiert nur Einer. Mit einem Gedanken! mit einem  
Winke! [...] Das Heer ist eine gedingte, Gedankenkraft-Willenlose Maschine geworden,  
die ein Mann in seinem Haupte lenkt und die er nur als Pantin der Bewegung, als eine  
lebendige Mauer bezahlt, Kugeln zu werfen und Kugeln aufzufangen.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (no place: no publ., 1774), 99–100.



The ‘devil’ in Jetter’s version of Herder’s critique is of course Alba, the demonic will that controls the machines. Egmont expresses a similar idea at the close of the play: the soldiers guarding him are not commanded by their own ‘Gemüt’, but by ‘ein hohles Wort des Herrschers’ (III/1, p. 329). The point at issue in *Egmont* is whether the Low Countries will retain their character and the diversity we see in the street scenes, or will turn into a uniform, modern mechanized state, as described by Herder.<sup>37</sup> Egmont is motivated by a desire to resist the hollowing out of character, whether the hollowing out of the people by Alba’s military repression, an omen of future mechanization, or his own hollowing by the thought of others. Thus Egmont reflects on his conversation with Oranien:

Daß andrer Menschen Gedanken solchen Einfluß auf uns haben! Mir wäre es nie  
eingekommen, und dieser Mann trägt seine Sorglichkeit in mich herüber. — Weg! —  
Das ist ein fremder Tropfen in meinem Blute. Gute Natur wirf ihn wieder heraus!  
(*Egmont*, II, ‘Egmonts Wohnung’; MA, III/1, pp. 282)

Egmont has retained his ‘Charakter’; Oranien has lost his. Oranien thus prefigures one possible fate of the Low Countries — to become a land without character, a modern mechanized nation state under Spanish rule. If that is to be avoided, something of Egmont’s character must live on.

Retaining character in the modern world is, however, a quixotic project. It is a struggle for independence, regardless whether independence confers any advantage. Egmont wants to resist the pressure that Oranien’s thought threatens to have on him. The cost of doing so is to deny that Alba is on his way to Brussels: ‘ORANIEN Alba ist unterwegs. | EGMONT Ich glaubs nicht. | ORANIEN Ich weiß es’ (MA, III/1, pp. 280). Brutus has a similar aversion to other people’s thoughts which likewise ends in disaster. When Cassius and the other conspirators

---

<sup>37</sup> Peter Michelsen, ‘Egmonts Freiheit’, *Euphorion*, 65 (1971), 274-97 (p. 286).

propose sounding out Cicero, Brutus responds as if he would rather Cicero did not exist: ‘O, name him not’. Again when they discuss Antony, Brutus tries to expel the very thought of him: ‘Alas, good Cassius, do not think of him’ (*Julius Caesar*, II. 1. 149, 184). Brutus and Egmont want to preserve the integrity of their own thoughts, and they do so by rejecting any alien ideas that would confute or confuse them. Preserving their independence of mind is more important than assessing the situation.

*Egmont* does at least justify hero’s aversion to thinking. In two much-discussed images — the sleepwalker and the chariot of the sun — Egmont expresses his preference for a life lived free of care. The play supports his case with an extensive and subtle network of motifs linking Egmont’s way of life with his politics. One such network is the language of dishonourable crawling or creeping (*schleichen, kriechen, stehlen*) and its antithesis, standing firm honourably (*stehen*). The motif may have been inspired by Cassius’ famous challenge to Brutus:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world

Like a Colossus, and we petty men

Walk under his huge legs and peep about

To find ourselves dishonourable graves. (*Julius Caesar*, I. 2. 134–37)

Cassius’ hyperbolical contrast contains a powerful charge. It brings out a profound shame in Brutus at the miserable state of modern Rome. (In his translation, Wieland emphasized their abject state by translating ‘walk’ with ‘kriechen’.)<sup>38</sup> Brutus accepts Cassius’ challenge and

---

<sup>38</sup> ‘Wir kleine Zwerge kriechen zwischen seinen riesenmäßigen Beinen’, William

Shakespeare, *Theatralische Werke*, trans. by Christoph Martin Wieland, vol. 9 (Zurich: Haffmann, 1953), p. 17. Goethe’s father owned a complete set of Wieland’s Shakespeare

incorporates the language of standing honourably into his argument against killing Antony: ‘Let us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius. | We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar’ (*Julius Caesar*, II. 1. 165–66). Following the assassination, Brutus assumes the Romans will join the conspirators in standing firm: ‘People and senators, be not affrighted; | Fly not; stand stiff: ambition’s debt is paid’ (*Julius Caesar*, III. 1. 82–83). He will be sorely disappointed.

In *Egmont* the motifs of creeping and standing accompany the changes in the atmosphere in Brussels. In Act II Egmont draws a distinction between those who stand and those who creep or crawl. People who take life too seriously, who base their behaviour on mechanical thinking, may creep their way toward some measure of success:

Wenn ihr das Leben gar zu ernsthaft nehmt, was ist denn dran? Wenn uns der Morgen nicht zu neuen Freuden weckt, am Abend uns keine Lust zu hoffen übrig bleibt; Ists wohl des An und Ausziehens wert? Scheint mir die Sonne heut um das zu überlegen, was gestern war? und um zu raten, zu verbinden, was nicht zu erraten nicht zu verbinden ist, das Schicksal eines kommenden Tages? Schenke mir diese Betrachtungen; wir wollen sie Schülern und Höflingen überlassen, sie mögen sinnen und aussinnen, wandeln und schleichen, gelangen wohin sie können, erschleichen, was sie können. (Act II, ‘Egmonts Wohnung’; MA III/1, p. 276)

Creeping and crawling are contrary to Egmont’s values. Accordingly he uses this language to describe his antagonist the ‘petty’ man Alba (‘[...] ein kleiner Geist erschleichend [...]’, Act V, ‘Gefängnis’; MA III/1, p. 322). Again Egmont’s values parallel the experience of the people of Brussels. Jetter reports that the ‘Inquisitions Diener [...] schleichen herum und passen auf’ (Act I, ‘Armbrustschießen’; MA III/1, p. 251).

---

translations: Franz Götting, ‘Die Bibliothek von Goethes Vater’, *Nassauische Annalen* 64 (1953), pp. 23–69 (p. 54).

Egmont's ideal is like Brutus': to stand firm. The people, he says, should be true to their own values and resist new, foreign doctrines ('Steht fest gegen die fremde Lehre'). While the people stand firm as private citizens, Egmont will protect them by climbing until he stands firm and fearless at the pinnacle of power. The threefold repetition of *stehen* is telling:

Ich stehe hoch, und kann und muß noch höher steigen, ich fühle mir Hoffnung, Mut und Kraft. Noch hab ich meines Wachstums Gipfel nicht erreicht und steh ich droben einst; so will ich fest, nicht ängstlich stehen. (Act II, 'Egmonts Wohnung'; MA III/1, p. 277)

The word 'ängstlich' is also telling. Egmont knows that the people have been made anxious by the Inquisition's sinister monitoring. The changed political climate will test his belief in carefree living. When Alba imposes a curfew, anxiety turns into fearful silence; only a few citizens — Jetter, Soest, the Zimmermeister, Vansen — still brave the streets or, as Vansen acidly puts it, have not yet 'untergekrochen' like 'Mäuschen' (Act IV, 'Straße'; MA III/1, p. 293).

Egmont shares their fate of the intimidated population. Imprisoned by Alba, he loses his natural spontaneity and vitality, and in the course of a dense monologue he works through his anxiety. At first he thinks the prospect of execution has made him fearful:

Ich fühls, es ist der Klang der Mordaxt, die an meiner Wurzel nascht. Noch steh ich aufrecht und ein innrer Schauer durchfährt mich. Ja sie überwindet, die verräterische Gewalt, sie untergräbt den festen hohen Stamm, und eh die Rinde dorrt, stürzt krachend und zerschmetternd deine Krone. (Act V, 'Gefängnis' [I]; MA III/1, p. 313)

The tree metaphor has obvious appeal, combining his signature motif of standing firm with the threat of destruction. It is the wrong metaphor though, because it implies that his anxiety

results from fear of death. As an experienced soldier he knows this to be untrue: ‘Seitwenn begegnet der Tod dir fürchterlich? mit dessen wechselnden Bildern wie mit den übrigen Gestalten der gewohnten Erde du gelassen lebstest?’ (p. 314). Having remained composed in the face of death, he is certainly not a coward as described by Caesar: ‘Cowards die many times before their deaths; | The valiant never taste of death but once’ (*Julius Caesar*, II. 2. 32–33). The problem, he realizes, is not ‘der rasche Feind’ death, but prison, ‘des Grabes Vorbild, dem Helden wie dem Feigen widerlich’ (p. 314). His anxiety results from the loss of freedom. He felt the same restlessness during political discussions in the assembly of nobles:

Unleidlich ward mir’s schon auf meinem gepolsterten Stuhle wenn in statlicher  
Versammlung die Fürsten, was leicht zu entscheiden war, mit wiederkehrenden  
Gesprächen überlegten und zwischen düstern Wänden eines Saals, die Balken der  
Decke mich erdrückten. (p. 314)

It is a telling insight as it shows how the process of practical politics, of debate and negotiation, is intolerable to him. Anxiety strikes when instinct is supplanted by collective deliberation.

Although Egmont’s hopes of rescue come to nothing, in the play’s final scene his rejuvenation survives the now certain knowledge of his death. Seeing a vision of Clärchen as Freedom completes his transformation into a political symbol. In his final monologue he meets the challenge set by Cassius to Brutus: the fate of Romans must not be to crawl into ‘dishonourable graves’, but to stand up against tyranny. Egmont will leave prison and walk bravely to an ‘honourable death’:

Horch! Horch! Wie oft rief mich dieser Schall zum freien Schritt nach dem Felde des  
Streits und des Siegs! Wie munter traten die Gefährten auf der gefährlichen rühmlichen  
Bahn. Auch ich schreite einem ehrenvollen Tode aus diesem Kerker entgegen, ich

sterbe für die Freiheit, für die ich lebte und focht, und der ich mich jetzt leidend opfre.

(Act v, 'Gefängnis' [II]; MA III/1, p. 329)

Egmont is now fully aware of his status as a martyr and as a symbol with a legacy. The play enacts his journey from the carefree, tradition-minded paternalist of the old political world to the heroic martyr for freedom and national independence. And it does so through an intertextual engagement with the motifs of standing and creeping, honour and dishonour of *Julius Caesar*. By adapting the language of Shakespeare's Romans, Goethe creates a hero who matches and even exceeds Brutus. Egmont will have a concrete political legacy in the independence of the United Provinces, in contrast to Brutus' merely rhetorical legacy.

\* \* \*

*Egmont* ends with a stylistic *salto mortale*, although not, as it happens, into the world of opera. There is no operatic singing, choral or otherwise, nor the ballet that typically closed eighteenth-century operas. Egmont's vision is a mixture of tableau vivant and dumb-show accompanied by music.<sup>39</sup> The figure of Freedom appears through an opening in the scenery, wearing appropriately 'heavenly' garb, presumably some Hellenizing drapery such as Emma Harte wore when performing her famous 'attitudes'. Goethe witnessed Emma's performances as a guest of William Hamilton in Naples in March 1787, a few months before he put the finishing touches to *Egmont*. A connection with Emma's attitudes is suggested by the fact that the figure of Freedom is described as having 'die Züge von Clärchen' (Act v, 'Gefängnis' [II]; MA III/1, p. 328).<sup>40</sup> Without being overly literal-minded, we might imagine

---

<sup>39</sup> Goethe tried to interest Philipp Christoph Kayser in composing incidental music for the play. See MA III/1, pp. 828–29.

<sup>40</sup> A connection between the end of *Egmont* and Emma's attitudes is implied by Boyle, though not spelt out as clearly as I do here: Nicholas Boyle, 'Preface', in *Proserpina*:

that Clärchen performing an ‘attitude’ in the manner of Emma. In order to indicate the events that will follow Egmont’s execution and encourage him to die with fortitude, Clärchen as Freedom accompanies her attitude with silent gestures. Dumb-show of this kind had been employed in early modern drama, most famously in parodic form in the play-within-a-play in *Hamlet*. Neither dumb-show nor tableau vivant were traditionally part of opera. Schiller was right in principle though: the play shifts suddenly from an illusionistic to an anti-illusionistic mode. The play departs from the canons of eighteenth-century drama in ways designed to draw attention to its artificiality. Opera might have been incompatible with the illusionistic mode of *Egmont*, though at least it was a highly popular eighteenth-century mode. Dumb-show had not been considered a plausible dramatic mode since the seventeenth century, and the tableau vivant was a new and largely unknown fashion.

Whatever Goethe hoped to achieve with this new and alien form of ending, the strategy was dangerous. It might easily seem an act of desperation by a playwright who has failed to create a hero worthy of his posthumous fame. However, the issue of Egmont’s legacy is repeatedly raised by the play, even if not in the terms required by Schiller’s theory of tragedy. One aim of this essay has been to show that there is more intertextual contact between *Egmont* and *Julius Caesar* than has previously been thought. Among other things the rich intertextuality establishes Egmont as a modern Brutus. Like Brutus he fails as a practical politician, but Brutus’ errors of judgement are arguably more grievous. Egmont also seems more deserving than Brutus of Antony’s famous ‘This was a man!’ He defends the values of humanity and resists the politics of the modern state more consistently than Brutus. Intertextual links repeatedly draw attention to his superiority. In this sense the play’s politics do justify the

---

*Goethe’s Melodrama with Music by Carl Eberwein*, ed. by Lorraine Byrne Bodley (Dublin: Carysfort, 2007), pp. xvii-xx (p. xix).

sudden shift to an anti-illusionistic mode. When Egmont is executed, the old political order of humane paternalism ends and is replaced by a new machine-like politics, represented by the Absolutism of Alba and the chess-like strategies of Oranien. The new politics, however, is a politics of the hollow self, compared to which Egmont represents real values, in particular a sense that politics should be about living. Throughout the play his self-presentation circles around this focal point: he rejects the deadening impact of alien thought, asserts his own independence, and presents himself in a manner bordering on the mythopoeic.

Nor is this merely Egmont's self-projection. Egmont becomes a symbol because Alba makes him one. When Egmont proposes that the king should offer a general pardon, Alba argues that this would set a bad example: 'Und jeder der die Majestät des Königs, der das Heiligtum der Religion geschändet, ginge frei und ledig hin und wieder! Lebte, den andern zum bereiten Beispiel daß ungeheure Verbrechen straflos sind?' (Act IV, 'Der Culenburgische Palast'; MA III/1, p. 303). Alba's plan is to staunch the rebellion by executing Egmont as an example to the people of the Low Countries of what happens when the rule of Spain is threatened. When Egmont demands that Ferdinand condemn his father's tactics, Ferdinand reminds us of the theme of theatrical representation by exclaiming: 'zu einem solchen Schauspiele bin ich gesendet!' (Act V, 'Gefängnis' [II]; MA III/1, p. 322). Egmont completes the development of the theme in his final words, urging the people of the Low Countries to ready themselves for sacrifice by following his example: 'Und euer Liebstes zu erretten, fallt freudig wie ich euch ein Beispiel gebe' (p. 329).

The play's politics require Egmont to become a symbol, and as he does so the play's form shifts into a mode that is more consciously artful. In his final monologue, following the



vision, Egmont's words fall into iambic rhythms including full lines of blank verse

(underlined here):

Verschwunden ist der Kranz! Du schönes Bild das Licht des Tages hat dich  
 verscheuchet! Ja sie waren's, sie waren vereint die beiden süßsten Freuden meines  
Herzens. Die göttliche Freiheit, von meiner Geliebten borgte sie die Gestalt; das  
 reizende Mädchen kleidete sich in der Freundin himmlisches Gewand. In einem ernsten  
Augenblick erscheinen sie vereinigt, ernster als lieblich. Mit blutbefleckten Sohlen trat  
sie vor mir auf, die wehenden Falten des Saumes mit Blut befleckt. Es war mein Blut  
und vieler Edlen Blut. Nein es ward nicht umsonst vergossen. Schreitet durch! Braves  
 Volk! Die Siegesgöttin führt dich an! Und wie das Meer durch eure Dämme bricht; so  
brecht, so reißt den Wall der Tyrannei zusammen und schwemmt ersäufend sie von  
ihrem Grunde, den sie sich anmaßt hinweg!

*Trommeln näher.*

Horch! Horch! Wie oft rief mich dieser Schall zum freien Schritt nach dem Felde des  
 Streits und des Siegs! Wie munter traten die Gefährten auf der gefährlichen rühmlichen  
 Bahn! Auch ich schreite einem ehrenvollen Tode aus diesem Kerker entgegen, ich  
 sterbe für die Freiheit für die ich lebte und focht, und der ich mich jetzt leidend opfre.

*Der Hintergrund wird mit einer Reihe spanischer Soldaten besetzt welche*

*Halparten tragen.*

Ja führt sie nur zusammen! Schließt eure Reihen, ihr schreckt mich nicht. Ich bin  
gewohnt vor Speeren gegen Speere zu stehen und rings umgeben von dem drohenden  
 Tod das mutige Leben nur doppelt rasch zu fühlen.

*Trommeln.*

Dich schließt der Feind von allen Seiten ein! Es blinken Schwerter, Freunde höhern  
Mut! im Rücken habt ihr Eltern, Weiber, Kinder!

*Auf die Wache zeigend.*

und diese treibt ein hohles Wort des Herrschers nicht ihr Gemüt. Schützt eure Güter!

Und euer Liebstes zu erretten, fallt freudig, wie ich euch ein Beispiel gebe.

The last two paragraphs of the speech consist mainly of iambic pentameters, six of them. There is no evidence that Goethe intended to rewrite *Egmont* in verse, as he had done with *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. Rather we should probably read this speech as a form of heightened prose that uses iambic rhythms for extra rhetorical force. In this respect it bears a strong similarity to the iambic rhythms of the first prose version of *Iphigenie auf Tauris*.

The ending of *Egmont* becomes stylized and artificial because of what it seeks to represent. It extends into a future that is unlike what it has represented hitherto, and it requires a commensurate shift into a new and unexpected symbolic mode. Egmont's dream vision and the monologue that follows it point towards a future that is unreal in the straightforward sense that it has not happened yet. It is also unreal in a political sense. Egmont will not actually lead the Low Countries to independence. Instead his execution will energize them, and people will continue to be motivated by the *idea* of Egmont. The closing moments of the play, with their highly symbolic and artificial manner, represent the transformation of Egmont from a real and in some respects politically inadequate agent into a political idea, one could even say an ideal. Here lies the key to the play's politics. In order to be an ideal, Egmont has to fail in reality, because the motivation for the politics of independence has to be found outside politics, or at least outside politics in the narrow and hollow sense represented by Alba and Oranien. Egmont's antipathy to this form of real politics is precisely what qualifies him as a political symbol. The people of the Low Countries will rebel in his cause, in the cause of a life worth living. Egmont thus fulfils Antony's praise of Brutus: 'This was a man!'